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ABSTRACT

A case study examined the classroom behavior of a third grader named Andrea. Andrea's lips moved but no response could be heard. Because Andrea was an appealing child, her lack of oral communication became a challenge for her teacher. Members of the Educators Forum supported feelings that Andrea needed to be helped to use oral language. An observer in the class recorded Andrea's interaction with peers, her movement in and around the classroom, and her contacts with other teachers. It was not known how conscious Andrea was of the fact that silence is a powerful tool and can be used to manipulate others. The cause or causes of elective mutism are often complicated and require long-term therapy. Through a consistent program of stimulating curriculum, some behavior modification, opportunities for expression, warmth, and a constant expectation of a response of some kind, Andrea began to respond orally. (MG)

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ANDREA: THE CASTING OF HER SPELL

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Andrea: The Casting of Her Spell

--watch out!

For though Shadow has no voice,

like the echo,

it can cast a spell over you--

from SHADOW by Marcia Brown

She cast a spell over me during an entire school year. An elective mute? Did that descriptive phrase fit Andrea? Must I adapt my curriculum to meet the needs of one who does not speak in school? What behavior modification would encourage oral communication? Would building confidence help free the voice within her? How could I make a difference? Or could I? Those and other questions continued to haunt me.

When school opened in September, I had a third grade class of thirty-one children. One was a boy from a substantially-separate classroom who needed time and support from me to feel at home and accepted by his peers. Another was a child who had been slated to repeat second grade but a last-minute change of mind from his mother placed him in my class. His behavior was inappropriate and his academic achievement was minimal. One child spoke no English; two others had limited fluency. There were too many bodies for the size of the room and there was not enough furniture for all. While trying to deal with all of that plus everything else that is required in the beginning days of a new year, I paid scant attention to Andrea, a sweet, smiling, agreeable girl who was in the right place at the right time doing the assigned task without question. When I did notice her, it was to realize how attractive she was--a beautiful black girl dressed neatly in bright colors, often shades of pink, with her hair carefully arranged with several barrettes holding braids, all of it off her face except for a fluff of bangs. She was almost always smiling, especially when she was aware I was looking at her.

I noticed that the girls who were in her class last year were solicitous, supportive and protective of her this year. For instance, when I called Andrea's name at attendance, her lips moved but I heard no response. When I would say, "I can't here you", there would be a chorus of voices saying, "She said it"! In reading group, I'd coax her to read so that we could hear her and the others would insist that they could hear her. If I asked Andrea a direct question, she would give one of three responses. She would smile, or smile and move her lips in response, or smile and whisper an answer. I guessed that smiling was her defense against disapproval. It would be much later before I heard any vocalized speech in what the children called her "real voice". In the meantime, I was become very good at lip reading!

Fortunately, an end of September grade reorganization cut my class size and I was able to concentrate more fully on individuals among my students.

Gradually, I began to know her a little and to learn more about Andrea. I talked with her second grade teacher and found out that she did not talk at all in that classroom but that some of the girls reported hearing her talk on the playground and that she did talk with them on the phone. She also invited two of the girls to her birthday party in June of second grade and she talked with them at her home. Andrea is from a nearby city participating in an urban/suburban program that buses children to the city where I teach. She entered the program at the beginning of first grade. She had attended kindergarten in her home city. The first grade teacher told me she had been very concerned about Andrea's lack of speech but that Mrs. Walker, Andrea's mother, did not consider it a problem. Mrs. Walker pointed out that this was a new school for Andrea, that she left home early and had a long bus ride and that seemed to her to be reason enough for her to be 'shy' at school. She had decided not to have Andrea seen by either the school psychologist or the school social worker or to seek outside therapy for her. Mrs. Walker also had indicated that there had never been any mention of a

problem before first grade. In fact, the too brief record from her kindergarten experience refers to her as quiet, shy and hesitant about speaking.

Because Andrea is an appealing child, her lack of oral communication became a challenge to me. In the beginning, I accepted the premise that she didn't talk because she was "shy". I was sure that I could encourage her by use of my considerable "bag of tricks" gained over the years by being a teacher of both kindergarten and early primary grades. I was good at confidence building! I encouraged her to speak; I rewarded even the faintest whisper. I silently placed self-stick notes on her desk that proclaimed "Awesome Andrea". She left them in place until they wore out. I knew she appreciated them. Her eyes followed me wherever I went. Sometimes I wondered how she got her work done with so much attention given to what others were doing, and especially to what I was doing.

Her work, however, was done correctly and on time. She was in a high grade-level reading group. She demonstrated her comprehension skills through written answers to focused questions. Basic skills of phonics and word meanings were shown through completion of workbook pages. Spelling was correct on weekly spelling lists and average on other written work. She listened to math introduction and then did her assigned pages without asking for help. She was a silent observer in science, social studies and all group discussions. She scored well on the state-mandated testing in both reading and math. She passed the creative writing segment. In the beginning of the year, she did not show much imagination in writing but later produced some very creative expressive poetry and stories. She participated well in both music and art, each taught by specialists outside the classroom.

During the year, I attended meetings of the Educators Forum, a teacher research group. From time to time, I shared my observations and my concerns about Andrea to the group. Members of the group were responsive to me and supported my feeling that Andrea

needed to be helped to use oral communication. True to the guidelines developed by the members of Forum over the years, my colleagues refrained from trying to prescribe or to suggest a "cure". Instead, they asked questions that prodded me to extend my awareness of Andrea and her relationship to me and to the group. Some of these questions were: How much communication does she have with other children? What are the variations in her body language? When is she stiff? When is she relaxed? What are the variations in her smiles? Does she sometimes smile out of anxiety; at other times as a "smile"? Does she still call friends on the phone? Would she talk to me, her teacher, on the phone? How does she process language? And more.

They also asked me if it would be helpful to have an observer in my classroom, an extra pair of eyes to record events, interaction with peers, movement in, around and out of the room, to see her with other teachers in the expressive areas of art and music. I responded positively and enthusiastically to that idea. I especially wanted to know where she was looking when I wasn't looking at her. (I found out that she continued to look at me whether I was looking at her or not!) A wonderful opportunity presented itself at that time in the person of Jean, a third grade teacher on sabbatical, who was looking for an opportunity to collaborate with a classroom teacher for a course she was taking.

Jean's visits, her written notes, our shared conversations, and the insights gained have given me food for thought and fuel for the journey. In addition, Jean initiated a literature search which turned up abstracts of 38 articles on "Elective Mutism". She obtained eight articles and I perused all of them for greater understanding to learn of case studies similar to that of Andrea and searching for any elucidating glimpse of what might be a new approach for me to take with her. Together, we spent a day visiting a fourth grade classroom in another town to observe an elective mute, a nine year old boy.

While Jean was observing, and we were reading more about the subject, other things were happening at many different levels. I had a conference with Mrs. Walker in October. She was pleasant, very talkative and said that she wished that she had taken the advice of the first grade teacher and had sought help then for her daughter. She admitted that she did not see Andrea's lack of oral communication a problem. She thought she'd "get over it". She described Andrea at home as loud and bossy, especially with her five year old sister. (Her sister was a kindergartner at our school.) She said at that time that she was in counseling for herself and that Andrea was seeing a therapist once a week. She confided that she and her husband had been separated for two years but that he had recently returned to the home. I got a sense she felt that his leaving had contributed to Andrea's not talking and that his return might help her recover speech. I saw Mrs. Walker again in December, just before Christmas, and she told Andrea to wish me a Merry Christmas. Andrea mouthed the words but did not vocalize them. Her mother said, "Tell her 'Merry Christmas' or you won't get any Christmas presents." Andrea clearly spoke, "Merry Christmas, Mrs. Frechette." In January, I met with both Mr. and Mrs. Walker to discuss Andrea's mid-year report. They were satisfied with her progress and happy that I was finding areas of accomplishment to describe and did not concentrate exclusively on her lack of oral communication. Apparently they had felt too much emphasis had been placed on that in the past. In April, having learned that Mr. Walker was no longer in the home, I saw Mrs. Walker and found that she had again obtained a restraining order against him.

After Mrs. Walker had told me that Andrea had been receiving therapy, I felt that it was important for me to talk with her therapist. I was told that Dr. B. would prefer to call me and that I should not try to contact her. I well remember the day before Halloween. My class had joined the other third grade class in their classroom for a Halloween party. Over the intercom,

I heard the secretary ask me to come to the office for a phone call from Dr. B. I left my class in the care of the other third grade teacher and anxiously made my way to the office. Although I was thinking about 40 children partying upstairs, I tried to be as concise as possible when responding to her questions of how Andrea was doing in the classroom, how I was handling her and how she related to peers.

I told her of one recent incident when I had handed Andrea a piece of paper and asked her to write the answer to my question, "When will you say 'Good morning' to me?" She wrote to me, "Tomorrow." The next morning, I related to Dr. B., Andrea came in and I, as usual, said, "Good morning, Andrea". She mouthed the words, "Good morning" but did not vocalize them. I reminded her that she had told me that she was going to speak those words and I asked her to return to the corridor and come back ready to say them. She did that and returned immediately and said "Good morning" in an audible, although croaking voice. I praised Andrea and she seemed pleased with this exchange.

Dr. B., however, was not pleased with this story and suggested that I had put undue pressure on Andrea and that I should be more accepting of her lack of oral communication. I asked her for suggestions of how to help Andrea in my classroom and she said that it was not her role to advise me. I felt uncomfortable about the conversation because I had been pulled from my classroom at a difficult time and, after seeking information, Dr. B. had criticized my handling of Andrea and the call was not very helpful. A second call from her in November was equally unhelpful. I happened to be in the office copying some articles I had found when she called. It seemed like a good time to clear the negative impression I had received the first time, so I opened with a comment that it was appropriate that she had called at that moment as "I was here in the office copying some articles I found on 'elective mutes'." After a short pause, she said, "That's not a label I use". Again, she asked about classroom procedure and

response with Andrea. I felt that she was picking my brains for what I was doing, why I was doing it and the success or lack of success in each instance. Again she said there were things she couldn't share and the call ended without her being helpful to me.

Shortly after that, I found out that Mrs. Walker had terminated Andrea's therapy because Dr. B. had told her that it should continue at least one and one-half years and she thought that was excessive. My reading of research indicates and one and one-half years is a minimum time for therapy to be effective.

How did I encourage Andrea to use oral language in the classroom? BEcause I knew that she had talked with Jessica on the playground and on the telephone, I asked both of them if they would read a story together into a tape recorder if I found a space where they could be alone. They agreed and I took them to a carpeted, isolated area in the building. We selected a story they both could read. I told them that I would put the tape recorder on record and that when they had finished, they could simply unplug the machine and bring it to me. Several minutes later, they returned, both looking very pleased with themselves, carrying the tape recorder, cord dragging along behind. We went into the teachers' room to listen to it. Then and there, I heard Andrea's voice, clearly reading alternating pages with her friend. Andrea seemed pleased with herself and unintimidated by my listening to the tape. During the time we were listening, the principal came by and I asked Andrea if it was all right if she listened, too. Andrea nodded assent.

Another day, I asked the two girls if they would talk into the tape recorder and simply have a conversation. I set them up in the classroom next door, which was empty at the time. We discussed what they might talk about and I left them to be alone. As I left the room, the custodian went in to sweep. When we listened to the tape, there was nothing on it except sounds of the room being swept and chairs being moved. They both said they couldn't think

of anything to say. We then made up some questions to they could conduct an interview of each other. I took them to the place where they had read together so successfully. In listening to that tape, I could hear Jessica asking very softly, "What do you do when you get home from school?" After that, there was nothing but unintelligible whispering. Obviously, reading was easier and, apparently, neither girl was ready for spontaneous speech.

After I learned that Maya Angelou had been an elective mute for five years from age seven to twelve, I read her autobiography, I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS. Later, I had the marvelous experience of hearing Ms. Angelou speak at a local college. In both her book and in her presentation, she credited poetry and a caring woman in her community with helping her to reclaim her voice. Since then, I've helped assemble a collection of poetry that seems to speak to Andrea. I've obtained poetry by Langston Hughes and other Black poets, poetry about the city, and poems with words that are fun to say. I've read a wide variety and then have asked her, "Of the ones I've read, which one or ones do you like best?" She silently indicates one or more and I've copied them and put them in a folder which she keeps in her desk. When I think of it, I take her aside, usually out of the classroom, and I read them to her. I ask her to read to me, too, and she does in a very quiet voice, barely audible. She has not initiated any sessions of poetry reading. I cannot think of anything she <u>has</u> initiated in the classroom.

Next, I had an opportunity to observe talking with her father--the beginning of a dramatic turn of events for Andrea. Due to a busing problem, parents were required to be responsible for their children's transportation for a period of several days. Andrea's father came to pick her up on two consecutive days. I was standing in the corridor at dismissal time. Mr. Walker was there, holding Andrea's bag while she was getting her outdoor clothing. She began a playful game with him, asking him if he knew what was in her bag. When she told

him there was a worm in it, he pretended to be afraid and they had several verbal exchanges. Her voice was delightful, lilting and full of expression. She clearly wanted me to hear her voice, an experience quite different from those on the playground when she talked with children only out of my range. The next afternoon was a repeat performance. When she told her father that she wanted to go by bus, he asked, "What bus?" She answered, "The regular bus". He repeated the question in a different tone of voice and she repeated her answer, matching the pitch of his voice. When I asked, in the spirit of what I perceived to be a game, "What bus?", she mouthed the words, "The regular bus", but no sound was audible.

The next day, I took her aside and reminded her of the talking I had heard her do and told her that I thought her voice really wanted to come out. I asked her if that were true and she nodded. I asked her if we could choose a date when she would begin to talk and, again, she nodded. I got a calendar and suggested a day two weeks hence. She agreed. The next day, I asked her if she still wanted to go through with it and she nodded that she did. I then got a piece of paper and made out a two week calendar, ending with the letter "T" for Talk Day. I told her that I would keep the paper in a folder on my table and that each day she could cross of the date. Only on the first day did I have to remind her. After that, she entered the room, remembering to find the paper and to make her mark on the date for that day.

Just before "T Day", at the suggestion of my friend, a clinical psychologist, who had first given me the term, "elective mute", I gave Andrea an opportunity to get off the hook if she wanted. I told her that if she couldn't do it, it would be all right; nothing would happen to her if she didn't. The next morning, when I saw her, I cold tell that she was going to do it! She looked more beautiful than ever. Her body was relaxed and she moved with an ease that is usually absent. I asked her if she was going to talk and she nodded, not yet speaking. Before entering the classroom, I said to her that we should plan when she was going to start talking

and we agreed that it would be at attendance. When that time came, she said her name loudly and clearly. The children were amazed and made such a fuss over her, I had to move the class along to the first lesson of the day. Throughout the day, she audibly answered questions, read aloud in reading group and talked with the children at snack time. All speech was in response to others; none of it did she initiate, but she was talking! On her calendar, she wrote, "I did it!" In her journal, she wrote, "Today I started talking." That was Friday. On Monday, she was the Andrea of the past. In fact, if anything, she was more withdrawn, less responsive to any of us, peers and adults, and her body resumed its previous rigid posture.

I found out later that she had refused to speak to an aunt at a family gathering that weekend and, when reprimanded by her mother, said, "I don't have to because I'm talking at school all the time now!" Two steps forward and one step backward--or is it the other way around? At least, she had proved to herself that she could talk in the classroom and she knew that we all knew she could do it.

Another step forward occurred when I was selecting reading partners who go once a week to the kindergarten. This is a popular activity and all hands go up to be chosen. Andrea looked as if she wanted to be chosen. I asked her and, again, she nodded assent. I asked her if she would read to her partner and she nodded. Asked if she would use her "real" voice, she nodded. So she was selected. I warned the kindergarten teacher of the potential problem and waited for a report. Yes, she had read audibly. At the third week, I went down to see and hear for myself. I walked into the room and saw her with her partner at the other end of the room. As I approached them, I heard the kindergartner say, "I can't hear you". I asked her if she could usually hear Andrea, and she said, "I can always hear her except right now." I left them and went back to my own classroom.

Where do we go from here? I continued to ask the question of school support staff--the school principal, psychologist, social worker, head of the program that brings students from the city into my community. Some of them thought there was no problem; some despaired of an uncooperative mother; others thought there was progress and that she was "beginning to come out of her shell". Each teacher, from kindergarten on, had expressed that hope. The observations made indicated that her silence did, indeed, interfere with teaching and learning in the classroom. I waited long periods of time for her to indicate whether or not she would respond to me. Making choices was extremely difficult for her. Her peers were very aware of her as "the one who doesn't talk" and everything came to a complete halt with children leaning forward in their seats while we all waited for her. Silence is a powerful weapon and can be used to manipulate others. How much of that was conscious with Andrea, we did not know.

The research is not extensive because it is a rare phenomenon. It does indicate that a traumatic experience, as was the case for Maya Angelou, is less frequently the cause than previously believed. The cause or causes are often complicated and require long-term therapy. If her family does not see the seriousness of this behavior, what can the school be expected to do?

A meeting of all concerned school personnel and Andrea's mother was scheduled to take place before the end of the school year. I continued to push for a full evaluation and for therapy to be resumed. Jean and I have the greatest respect for each other and that was the basis for a truly collaborative work. Our study continued to direct us down paths of inquiry. Together we wrote a paper directed to Andrea's fourth grade teacher.

Changes did take place. Through a consistent program of stimulating curriculum, some behavior modification, opportunities for expression, warmth and a constant expectation of a response of some kind, Andrea began to respond.

An end-of-year school performance included a poem done as a choral reading in the form of a round by the entire class. On the program was listed,"'Outside my Window', Words by Andrea Walker." **Words by my wordless student!**

As in September, I still saw her in June as a beautiful girl, always smiling, in the right place at the right time and doing her assigned work without question.

Speak to us, Andrea! You are not a shadow!